Pat DiNizio Jim Babjek Mike Mesaros Dennis Diken

Vanessa Adams

PLAYING HOUSE WITH THE SMITHEREENS

Pat DiNizio has a chair.

Yes he does.

Article by Danny McCue

There's a chair in Pat DiNizio's apartment on New York City's Lower East Side to which a microphone is Scotch-taped. A Fostex four-track cassette recorder occupies the seat. To record something he's written while playing any one of his three guitars, he pulls the chair close as he sits on the edge of his bed.

"I inherited a big box of 45s from my mom," Pat, songwriter and lead vocalist for the Smithereens, says. "She was a big rock 'n' roll fan, with a lot of Fats Domino, Little Richard, Everly Brothers singles, stuff by the Drifters. I learned to distinguish between songs by the color and design of the label on the record. The thing was, if two groups were on the same label, I couldn't distinguish, as a three year old, what artist it was. Bobby Darin and the Coasters were both on Atco, so if somebody said, 'Find "Splish Splash," ' I might wind up with "Yakety Yak."

"The knock against us has been that we were 'merely a Sixties copy band.' To an extent I could understand that. My whole knowledge of song structure and vocal harmony was learned from listening to AM radio of the Sixties, Cousin Brucie, Scott Muni, but there's a whole lot more to it than the music—when the Beatles came around in late 1963, early '64, it seemed to herald a pop art explosion, which came to a head in 1965. Immediately, besides the music, you had surfing, you had hot rods, you had the Addams Family and the Munsters; all of a sudden, whatever was important to youth culture at the moment received a high profile, and it was that as a whole which shaped the way I write.

"One night during the fall of 1979, a friend and I went looking for the Brill Building and wound up outside of Colony Records. Legend has it that all these tunesmiths like Leiber and Stoller, Carole King, Otis Blackwell, and Neil Sedaka would run down to Colony to buy the latest releases of the songs that they wrote. So we went in to browse and I came across an original copy of the second Buddy Holly album—the one with that portrait of him wearing those glasses—and I bought it. It cost twenty dollars.

"I remember being up 'til three or four in the morning on this rainy night, listening to this twenty-year-old album. I was so touched by the simplicity of what he was doing, the beauty of the melody and the very basic nature of the song structure, that it almost brought tears to my eyes. After all the other stuff I had heard over the years, all the musical phases I had been through, this struck me as the genre I wanted to work within."

In a coffee shop a few blocks from the clothing store Trash and Vaudeville, a new wave mecca, DiNizio punctuates his conversation by either rapidly stirring his coffee or pausing as he stirs it.

"Usually a melody will just pop into my mind. I could be walking down the street and all of a sudden it's there, and if I'm lucky, in that it's a good melody, it'll stick—although sometimes you have to run home and capture it on tape.

"From there it becomes a question of actually sitting down and developing that melody on the guitar. The melody will dictate the chord changes, minor or major, and from there my songs really begin to write themselves. I try to come up with a good hook and hopefully the melody and the hook will lead to a verse that's interesting to listen to; it can be a very frustrating process."

Long before the rest of the band hears any demos of what may or may not be on their next album, DiNizio scrupulously edits each tune, cutting out the superfluous, and paring each song to its barest essentials. "I cut real rough demos, usually just me singing, accompanying myself on guitar, and I rarely add any of the harmony vocals or any of that stuff because I don't want to handcuff the band. When you're working with a unit like I do, you do your best to get the song completely written while leaving room for it to breathe in the studio, room for the band or producers to inject their own ideas. I don't think it's a good idea to do a fully produced demo. I mean, where do you go from there?"

Back in his apartment, DiNizio runs his forefinger across the neck of his Fender Stratocaster, a replica of the one Buddy Holly used to play.

"I think the lesson I've learned is that if I try to write for anybody but myself, it's not going to work. We have an audience that we're hoping to please, but in the broadest sense our audience is a reflection of that part of me that's writing for myself. It's just a case of that audience liking the same things that I like."